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Six Dalit Paradoxes

D SHYAM BABU, CHANDRA BHAN PRASAD

During the past two centuries, religious, social, political and economic reforms sought to address the dalit problem so as to transform India from the caste-ridden system of discrimination into a modern and caste-neutral society. It is fair to say that these reforms have not sufficiently succeeded in improving either the social standing of dalits or their economic condition. It is no wonder, then, that the dalits are found, along with the tribals, in the bottom quintile on most parameters of human well-being. How does one explain the intractability of the dalit problem? A conference in the United States recently attempted to answer the question through its deliberations on six "great paradoxes". A report.

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The Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI) at the University of Pennsylvania organised a "Dalit Studies Conference" in the wake of Barack Obama's election as the first African-American President of the United States. Though the conference was mooted a year earlier, the timing (3-5 December 2008) coincided perfectly with the celebration of American diversity and the question naturally arose during the conference on the future of discriminated minority groups everywhere. A couple of participants queried, in fact, whether a dalit Obama could emerge in India.

The conference was an ambitious enterprise. "Dalit Studies" is not an established social science sub-field either in India or in the US, despite the recent efforts by the University Grants Commission to promote the subject through a more eclectic framework of exclusion/inclusion. However, the conference had several firsts to its credit. It was the first stand-alone dalit studies research conference organised by an American university. The earlier conferences/seminars focused more on caste, or socio-economic development, or violence, etc, in which the dalit angle was given ample space. But never before did anybody attempt an overarching framework – that would transcend area boundaries and raise more questions than it could answer. That limitation, in a way, whet the research appetites of many participants.

The conference was organised around six paradoxes, viz, the political paradox, religious paradox, paradox of Indian feminism, paradox of Marxist and non-brahmin ideologies, paradox of the postcolonial state, and paradox of the market. The two round tables, one comparing the African-American and dalit experiences, and the other on India's future and the future of dalits, sought to broaden the debate in ways that are needed to place the topic in context. The conference started with a keynote address by Narendra Jadhav, vice chancellor, University of Pune, on "Empowerment of Dalits and Adivasis: Role of Education in the Emerging Economy".

One significant and also fascinating aspect is that the conference became a paradox in itself. Palpable behind its rationale was the concern, genuine or patronising, that the conference must blaze a trail both in terms of academic investigations and policy prescriptions. But the presence of a large group of dalit scholars, from India and abroad, testified to the change, if not progress, that the community is undergoing. Nine out of 19 paper were presented by dalit scholars, and all the six sessions and two round tables accorded adequate representation to the community.

Political Paradox

Until the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) became a force to reckon with in Uttar Pradesh (UP) politics in the early 1990s, the received wisdom was that such a development would take place either in Maharashtra or in the south, given their legacy of lower caste/dalit movements for over a century. How does one explain the fact that the dalit assertion came to fruition in UP, the motherland of brahminism? Ramnarayan Rawat, who took the lead in putting together the conference, discussed the ebb and flow of the dalit movement in UP (and Punjab) whereas Chinnaiah Jangam's paper focused on the theme with regard to the "Telugu Country" (encompassing Telugu-speaking areas in Madras Presidency and also in Hyderabad state). Both papers ably utilised the archival sources to reconstruct the history of dalit movements during the first half of the 20th century.

Rawat contested two assumptions that (1) every dalit sub-caste is supposed to have had an impure occupation, hence the explanation for the untouchability it suffered, and (2) there was no dalit mobilisation in the north or specifically in UP. Both the colonial and post-colonial scholarship are deeply implicated in the construction and perpetuation of several myths: that the dalits were not a farming community but confined – "predominantly" – to their caste occupations, that their participation in popular movements like the Kisan Mahasabha was insignificant,

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that the dalits were "mostly" landless agricultural labourers. Rawat explained how Chamars dominated Agra leather industry, played a crucial role in the construction of Delhi as the new capital (in the words of one Jatav, "we supplied them with labour and stones"!), and there were both occupancy and non-occupancy tenants. For example, Sunderlal Sagar, a Chamar, was not only the founder of the Jatav Mahasabha in 1917 but the owner of textile mills and a printing press. Had academia cared to delve into available sources of history, the BSP phenomenon would have appeared less baffling and more inevitable.

On the other hand, one learnt from Jangam's narrative that the Andhra dalit movement suffered as the community ultimately lacked the economic base that the dalits in UP enjoyed and it also embraced Gandhian assimilation against keeping an independent identity. In his theoretical contribution, Gopal Guru critically examined the limitations of Indian nationalism, electoral politics, and globalisation which are presented as the three sequential spaces in which dalits can realise their vision. With regard to the first two spaces, the dalit tradition to a large extent draws its inspiration from Ambedkar and Phule who rightly saw them as submerged in the caste Hindu tradition. Guru explained how the world views represented by upper castes and lower castes still define life in India.

Religious Paradox

If the dalit question could be answered by religion, i e, if the problem is somehow the bane of Hinduism *alone*, non-Hindu religions should have solved the problem a long time ago. What is the condition of dalits, for example, in a state like Punjab where Sikhism, an egalitarian and non-Hindu religion, has had its sway for three centuries? The charge is equally placed at the doorsteps of Christianity. Three papers by Sanal Mohan, Rajkumar Hans and Rupa Viswanath, respectively, examined the cases of Kerala, Punjab and Tamil Nadu.

Mohan narrated how from the mid-19th century onwards, the dalit movements in Kerala played a catalytic role in creating the modern public sphere that came about in the state by the early 20th century. However, "elite histories and historiographies" have ignored dalits' contributions and given prominence to movements spearheaded by Ezhavas and Nairs first and later the communist movement. Be it Christianity as presented by the missionaries or communism, the dalits readily embraced them as agents of modernity. The question, whether the dalits' interest in non-Hindu religions was spiritual or material, was also addressed by Viswanath in the context of Madras Presidency. After the Queen's Proclamation of 1858 on British India's neutrality in matters of religion, the missionaries confronted a dilemma as to whether the "Pariahs'" conversion to Christianity was due to their interest in improving their material conditions or their genuine belief in the creed. The colonial state and the missionaries alike were in a fix when the caste Hindus argued, due to their compulsions of political economy, to keep their dominance over the untouchables, that upsetting caste hierarchies amounted to interfering with the religious beliefs of Hindus. The third contribution by Hans deals with dalits in Punjab and their complex relationship with Sikhism. He tells the story, mostly through the lives of dalit poets like Sadhu Daya Singh Arif, Bhai Jaita and others, how the dalit efforts to get assimilated into society were spurned by casteism that infested Sikhism. As a result, the dalits' later embrace of Adi-Dharm as spiritual succour injected a new vitality into the dalit movement.

As a panel, all the three presenters seemed to suggest that while one religion might have been the source of the dalit problem, others have also failed to show a way out.

Secular Ideologies

Two panels at the conference were dedicated to the discussion of the self-imposed limitations of "Indian" feminism, and how Marxist as well as non-brahmin ideologies failed to live up to their transformational possibilities. In the panel, "Paradox of Feminism", Shailaja Paik and Laura Brueck contested the widely held assumption that dalit women are better off than the upper caste women since the former's economic utility (hence their need to go out of home) accords them greater freedom and equality. But the obverse is more often true in that the very fact of dalit women's need to work make them susceptible to a litany of indignities. Moreover, both Paik and Brueck contend, dalit feminism faces the ever present danger of getting subsumed by either the nationalist

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project or anti-caste movements or dalit consciousness. Brueck also narrates how some dalit male writers brazenly ridicule dalit feminism and in that process have perpetuated and given legitimacy to upper caste patriarchal prejudices. Based on her fieldwork among the *jogini* (dalit) women in Andhra Pradesh, Jebroja Singh's paper explored the twin paradox of how dalit women who are branded as polluted assume the identity of a deity once dedicated, and also how "untouchable" women become touchable for "sexual exploitative purposes" (as) "...the woman's body becomes culturally public because of the apparent marriage between religion and culture".

The papers by K Satyanarayana, Hugo Gorringe (paper read in absentia) and M S S Pandian – dealt with the apparent failures of secular ideologies (including dalit mobilisations) which reject caste lock, stock and barrel but seek to solve an essentially caste problem. Satyanarayana and Gorringe discussed the two sides of the same coin. The marginalisation that the dalit identity suffers even within a revolutionary literary movement like VIRASAM (Telugu Revolutionary Writers' Association), Satyanarayana's concern exemplifies the dilemma inherent in the issue, namely, the inability and unwillingness of VIRASAM-like progressive organisations to give credence to caste by accepting it as a category. Gorringe's contribution brought to sharp relief the self-inflicted irrelevance of dalit parties (such as the Tamil Nadu's Dalit Liberation Panthers Party – the *Viduthaalai Ciruthaigal Katchi*) which while they "promise to eradicate caste...replicate the forms, structures and styles of politics from which they were previously excluded." Does dalit politics seek, in other words, structural reforms or has it become an instrument in the hands of enterprising dalit leaders? Hence, the rhetorical flourish, and also a message, in Gorringe's title, "From Panthers to Pussy-Cats?".

Pandian attempted in his theoretical contribution to funnel the above mentioned contradictions into three paradoxes: the Indian national project of banishing the talk of caste and not caste per se, the lower castes' insistence on using caste as more than a classification, and the ironical tradition of writing caste into law, by way of providing preferential benefits to certain groups. The way out, in his opinion, is that "identity politics needs to strive for new democratic consensus and yet not be trapped by the fiction of fixed identities..." If Pandian's conclusion sounds naïve, it is entirely because of the enduring paradox that caste presents.

Post-colonial State

The Indian state started its march in 1950 with the promise of eradicating caste but it not only failed in that project but ended up being a part of the problem. One explanation is that it inherited the colonial state's dubious relationship with caste and the other being that the state underestimated, as we do, the salience of the system. It is one thing to want caste to disappear as an insidious social practice with its insistence on hierarchy, but it is quite another to vanquish a deeply entrenched system. Its roots are so deep and invisible that we can forever debate whether it enjoys any religious sanction.

Despite the state's public stand against caste, what it had set forth as its task was the mere removal of caste-based disabilities, such as untouchability, and "compensate" its victims within a narrowly defined framework. An altruistic project without any pretensions of seeking radical alternatives could not have fared any better. Not only that, in its attempts to compensate caste victims, the state may have contributed to strengthening caste identities. Keeping as their vantage point the post-colonial state's abysmal record on caste, the three speakers in this panel, Sambaiah Gundimeda, D Shyam Babu and Surinder S Jodhka, focused on how the state and civil society deal with caste in ways that are at times contradictory and incoherent at others.

Gundimeda reminded the conference how the intractable feud in Andhra Pradesh between two dalit sub-castes, the Madiga(s) and Mala(s), is reproducing among the victims of caste the same old prejudice and injustice. For quite some time, these two castes have been locked in a controversy over whether to sub-categorise dalit reservations. The Madigas argue that a quota within a quota alone will help them access their rightful share in affirmative action benefits, a bulk of which is now being appropriated by the more educationally endowed Malas. The Malas' counter-argument based on merit, Gundimeda contended, is no way different from that of the upper castes who want to end affirmative action itself. Similar distributional conflicts are rife in other

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states, e g, the recent Meena-Gujjar agitation in Rajasthan.

Babu in his presentation examined at a macro-level the progress that the dalits have made to move from caste to class. According to him, a dalit acquiring a skill or economic prosperity would not automatically be freed of the caste stigma because it is the non-dalits who ought to recognise his new class status. However, media stereotypes, among others, are responsible for the perpetuation of a certain imagery that portrays dalits as inherently inferior to the non-dalits.

Jodhka explained, focusing on Punjab, how the state and political process play a central role in the reproduction of caste. By 1992, when Eleanor Zelliot published *From Untouchable to Dalit,* the dalit identity acquired a monolithic, all-India status as if dalits are a "single social/caste category with common identity, cultural history and unity of interests". On the one hand, the dalits in Punjab had to find their own symbols of identity, be it the Ad Dharm movement or the emergence of Guru Ravi Das as a religious symbol, and on the other, they should also own up to the divisions among them.

It is noteworthy that a point mentioned by Jodhka and many other participants in the conference that the state may be faulted for creating, albeit fictitiously, an all India identity for the dalits (through its nomenclature of the "Scheduled" Castes), but without this the community would have suffered due to internal divisions.

Paradox of Market

The last session was devoted to the "market" to examine whether it had anything in store for the dalits, how it deals with issues of caste and exclusion, or whether can it be a better way of education delivery. The first paper was based on a household survey conducted by CASI among 19,087 dalit households in two blocks of UP and examined the changes that have taken place in their day-to-day lives since the onset of economic liberalisation. The paper, presented by Chandra Bhan Prasad and Devesh Kapur, recorded a substantial improvement in the lives of dalits between 1990 and 2007: the number of households depending on their own land had increased; more dalits were found in share-cropping arrangements; a clear trend took place away from farm to non-farm work; there was greater migration to urban areas; and also the dalits were entering caste-neutral occupations. Their twin conclusions were that, first, caste is losing its rough edges even in a place like eastern UP, and; second, economic reforms since 1991 have created employment opportunities for dalits (albeit at the lower end). They also explained the results of their survey in three shopping malls around Delhi in which a significant number of upper caste men have been found entering the occupation of sanitation. "This is a market-driven distress forcing upper caste youth in betraying their caste", they summed up.

Karthik Muralidharan analysed the issue of education delivery to marginalised groups in rural areas highlighting the critical importance of quality education for dalit empowerment. He also raised a rarely posed question as to why dalit mobilisation, vibrant as it is in political and cultural arena, does not use even a fraction of its energy in demanding access to quality education.

The failure of markets to provide a neutral, if not inviting, place of employment for dalits (and also Muslims) was the theme of Paul Attewell and Katherine S Newman who presented a study they undertook along with Sukhadeo Thorat, Ashwini Deshpande, Surinder S Jodhka and S Madheswaran (the papers were published in *Economic & Political Weekly,* 13 October 2007). The study among the Indian corporate sector (both multinationals and domestic companies) found systematic discrimination in hiring practices against lower castes and Muslims. Their thesis was that even the modern capitalist enterprises are not immune to discrimination and exclusion based on caste and communal prejudices.

Conclusions

The conference succeeded as a forum to mull over several dalit paradoxes. The grand paradox that permeated the whole event being the enduring salience of caste itself. The dalits' efforts during the last two centuries to escape caste has been a story of hope and disappointment. No single way could have succeeded but from the colonial state to market, each has made its contribution towards a better future for the dalits.

One welcome development evident during the conference is the growing depth and breadth of dalit scholars and the possibility of a new dalit studies intellectual movement similar to subaltern studies, with one sharp contrast, though. Whereas elites wrote and thought of subalterns who had little intellectual agency in the project, a future dalit studies will be more vibrant with dalit scholars exercising intellectual leadership and agency.

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